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SUBJECT: FAMAGUSTA MAYOR FAVORS INCREASED BI-COMMUNAL
CONTACTS

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¶1. (SBU) INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY: Despite the total failure of the so-called "Finnish Initiative" in 2006 (Reftel), Greek Cypriot officials and property owners in Famagusta are actively seeking ways to keep their issue on the political map. The opening of the fenced-off area of Varosha and its eventual reconstruction by Turkish and Greek Cypriots working hand-in-hand would constitute an unparalleled confidence-building measure, Famagusta Mayor-in-exile Alexis Galanos told the Ambassador May 10. In hopes of building a bi-communal lobbying effort for his grandiose goal, Galanos is reaching across the Green Line to Turkish Cypriot counterpart "Mayor" Oktay Kayalp; the two leaders, along with the United Nations, are planning a high-visibility restoration of Famagusta's Venetian walls in ¶2008. Also consuming great chunks of Galanos's first six months in office is his effort to raise awareness of his "occupied" municipality. His staff have just concluded a high-profile petition campaign that targeted diaspora Famagustans, and he soon will take the signature book and his "Free Varosha Now" message to Washington and other capitals. On the broader Cyprus Problem, the slow pace of July 8 negotiations depressed the long-time politician. "Like a cancer, the specter of permanent partition is growing," he fretted. "We must take bold steps now." END SUMMARY.

"Exile" Mayors: Big Title, Small Job

¶2. (U) Nine pre-1974 municipalities lie in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots, of which Famagusta is the largest. For voting and other purposes, Greek Cypriots residing in the RoC-controlled areas continue to identify themselves as inhabitants of Famagusta, Kyrenia, and Morphou, inter alia, and their heirs are entitled (actually, encouraged) to do the same. In local elections, G/C voters cast ballots both in their places of current residence and in their birthplaces / historic homes. Most of the "occupied" city halls are little more than strip-mall offices staffed by mayors and a few councilmen (although they still collect big-city checks.)

¶3. (U) Famagusta has always occupied a higher profile, however. In 1984 it made the world stage when UN Security Council Resolution 550 called for the transfer of the fenced-off area of Varosha to UN administration. As befits a city that was once Cyprus's wealthiest and second most-populous, current Mayor Alexis Galanos is no political lightweight, having served as president of the national parliament in the early 1990s. Opposition DISY politicians lured the former MP out of retirement in 2006 in a successful

quest to defeat the AKEL (far left) incumbent, Yiannakis Skordis.

Let's Make Money Together

¶4. (SBU) Famagustans on both sides of the Green Line wanted their city opened, Galanos told the Ambassador May 10. Tearing down the fence around Varosha and allowing resettlement by its original inhabitants would unleash massive investments and create good jobs, mainly for needy Turkish Cypriots. Such a project would prove that Greek and Turkish Cypriots could work toward common goals and reap shared benefits. A boom in inter-communal economic activity might even follow. A realist, however, Galanos knew the sides were far apart in their negotiating positions, and negotiations were unlikely to tackle Varosha's final status anytime soon.

Pushing Discreetly on a Bi-communal Project

¶5. (SBU) In the run-up to the December 2006 municipal elections, Galanos privately had voiced his desires to improve coordination with the Turkish Cypriot Famagusta "municipality" and its head, "Mayor" Oktay Kayalp. It appears he is honoring his promise. Galanos informed the Ambassador that he, Kayalp, and UNFICYP head Michael Moller had agreed recently to organize a seminar focusing on conserving and renovating the Venetian-built walls that are Famagusta's most-recognized landmark. As a gathering of scientists, historians, and archaeologists, the event aimed to be apolitical. Yet politics had a way of creeping into

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every endeavor in Cyprus, Galanos chuckled. In fact, Foreign Ministry fears of the bi-communal event somehow conferring an element of recognition on the "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" had forced Galanos to abandon the idea of conducting the seminar within city limits; instead, it would take place at Ledra Palace, in the Buffer Zone. Galanos and his team would endeavor to keep extremists from both communities from hijacking the event, planned for early 2008.

Church Officials Surprising Allies

¶6. (SBU) Despite their reputation for espousing hard lines, officials from the Church of Cyprus, led by the Bishop of Kykkos, supported Galanos's initiative on Famagusta. Even Archbishop Chrysostomos II was on board, Galanos claimed. Another ally was in the wings, as the imminent Church re-org had created a new bishopric for Famagusta. "You'll like the new bishop," he insisted. (Note: Galanos is correct in his assertion; the new Famagusta Metropolitan, Vassilios, is a long-time Embassy contact.)

Petition Drive Exceeds Hopes

¶7. (U) Galanos segued into his other pet project, a petition drive aimed at raising awareness of Famagusta's plight. A successful internet, TV, and newspaper advertising effort had resulted in municipal staff collecting 26,000 signatures. "Only 20,000 voted in the last municipal elections," Galanos asserted, his better results a testament to his team's hard work and the seriousness with which Greek Cypriots viewed Famagusta/Varosha. Most signers were former residents and their children, but some were G/C youth who "self-identified" with the "occupied" city.

¶8. (SBU) With signatures in hand, Galanos soon would begin

his roadshow, he informed the Ambassador. In September he planned to visit the United States, where he would lobby for the return of his city before USG officials, UN General Assembly attendees, UN Secretariat staff, and members of the powerful Greek-American community. He hoped the Embassy might assist in organizing calls on State Department officials. (Note: Local media May 15 reported that Galanos was encountering difficulties convincing the responsible Parliamentary committee to release funds for the foreign travel. He has gone over the chairman's head, however, and lobbying President Tassos Papadopoulos and Parliamentary President Dimitris Christofias.)

Pessimistic Over Local Talks

¶9. (SBU) Galanos lamented that the communities' representatives had made so little progress under the July 8 Framework for negotiations. Time worked against the reunification of the island, a truth that both sides admitted but did little about. The current electoral instability in Turkey exacerbated an already bad situation, he added. "A heroic effort on Cyprus is needed. We cannot give up."

Comment:

¶10. (SBU) We were frankly surprised by Galanos's constructive stance toward Kayalp and the Turkish Cypriot Famagusta "municipality." With tough talk dominating discourse on both sides of the Green Line, to voice support for bi-communal efforts, especially ones involving both "governments," runs major risks. Like Nixon to China, however, the one-time hard-liner Galanos -- he stridently opposed the 2004 Annan Plan, and the pro-Annan DISY party recruited him for Famagusta mainly because his past made him more electable -- may believe his pedigree insulates him from a political tar-and-feathering. We hope he's right, and that he brings the seminar and other bi-communal projects to fruition. End Comment.
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